Opportunity Area

Fenland and East Cambridgeshire

Delivery Years 2021-2022 (Year 5)

Evaluation Report - Executive Summary

Riikka Hofmann & Sonia Ilie

Faculty of Education University of Cambridge

January 2023

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

Year 5 Evaluation Executive Summary

Low social mobility continues to be a substantial barrier to the realisation of children and young people's full potentials. A key lever for improving social mobility rests in addressing the educational inequality associated with differences in socio-economic background. This is because socio-economic disadvantage continues to be linked to fewer educational opportunities, lower educational attainment, and worse labour market outcomes. The Opportunity Area (OA) programme was a Government flagship programme, announced in 2016 and launched in 2017 to tackle low social mobility and entrenched regional disadvantage among young people through place-based educational interventions. The programme was originally funded for three years and received a one-year extension for year 4; subsequently the programme was extended into a fifth and final year, which this evaluation focuses on. The programme, which concluded in August 2022, focused on pupils who are most likely to encounter barriers to social mobility. A key part of the programme's strategy is to improve education, by addressing deep-rooted issues that affect children and young people's outcomes. The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECOA) was one of twelve OAs across the country, selected because of low levels of social mobility. The initial challenges for FECOA revolved around the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Disadvantaged children in the area performed relatively less well compared to similar children in other parts of the country, with enduring gaps in literacy and communication skills. There was also a need to develop the provision for children with disabilities or special educational needs. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues and posed further barriers to social mobility nationally and in the area. FECOA programmes have adapted to the pandemic context to address the substantial disruption to the educational process.

Background to this document

This executive summary draws together the key findings of the Year 5 evidence synthesis of the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECOA) programme. The full Year 5 synthesis is available online here. FECOA commissioned researchers from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, to generate a synthesis of evidence of impacts of FECOA programmes delivered during the fifth and final year of the programme (2021-2022). This builds on a previous evaluation by the team of the first four years of the programme (2017-2021). The year 5 evaluation drew on lessons from the Year 1-4 evaluation (which is available online here) and specifically focused on change over time and programme legacy in the region. The evaluation approach built on the following principles: (1) tracing change overtime through a start and end of year staff survey and exploring sustained trends in the documentary material; (2) using validated measures to survey practitioners about their learning and experiences; (3) developing and utilising educative reporting templates for practitioners delivering projects to facilitate and scaffold rich evidence-generation; (4) considering impacts on multiple levels from pupil to regional impacts. The evaluation draws on the staff survey responses, stakeholder focus groups, a review of 278 documents, including rich case studies reported on the as-developed templates. In determining the impact of FECOA and its constituent programmes, the synthesis also accounted for the impact of the pandemic on the ability to generate evidence of impact at a time of substantial disruption. The impacts reported here represent a snapshot of the wide range of evidence reviewed and do not cover all elements of the provision, given the diverse range of activities undertaken during the final year of the programme.

Impacts, by theme

Ready to Learn

Ready to Learn (RtL) was a key FECOA offering in the School Standards Activity priority. It involved a universal and a targeted offer to settings. The majority of schools focused their efforts to Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) related issues. Emerging evidence such as feedback from participants and families suggests that the great majority of schools receiving the targeted offer reported positive impacts of the offering. This was supported by interviews with headteachers. Only a very small number of schools were able to evidence this in a systematic manner and the schools' insights rarely translated into seeking to identify changes in outcomes. Where attempts were made to systematically collect data before and after interventions, such as an attendance, the impact of the pandemic made attributing impact difficult. While identifying causal impacts on pupil outcomes was not possible, the interviews suggest that the key legacy of the RtL theme may rest beyond the specific projects implemented in schools and Early Years (EY) settings. It focuses on the settings' learning about evidence-building approaches and implementation. The interviews suggested that many settings felt well-prepared to sustain projects and better prepared than before to implemented new ones as needs might arise.

Community Support

The Community Support theme encompassed a range of activity under the *Beyond School Gates* banner. The evaluation suggests high overall levels of engagement with the **Youth Advisory Boards**, despite some decreases in school engagement in Year 5. Specific impacts on the engaged young people could not be identified by the data that had been generated by the project. A before-and-after survey of young people participating in the one-off **Employment-related event by the Careers & Enterprise Company** identified an increase the proportions of attendees who could identify relevant employers and an improvement in their knowledge about available employment opportunities, while the **Healthy Mind, Healthy Body, Cooking at Home** provided opportunities for a relatively small group of young people to learn to cook and make meals, with 240 children and young people taking part in this project. The **Detached Youth Work** project, aiming to support young people to address the issues that they faced which may be causing a barrier to their social, emotional, educational development and wellbeing, suggested a 'dramatic' fall in antisocial behaviour incidents (ASB) in one specific are. **Parent Power** further represents one of the specific project legacies for FECOA, with the project continuing beyond the end of FECOA funding.

Early Years

Activity under this theme was linked to the three priorities of the Local Authorities EY Service Outcomes Strategy (Pre-birth to 3-year-olds practice; Learning and development, especially communication and language; Parental engagement and home learning). Much of the provision in this theme was reactive to the Covid-19 pandemic which had a major impact on the delivery of projects, and EY provision overall. In Year 5, the programme worked collaboratively with settings in a bespoke manner to support recovery. Evidence suggests that despite continued challenges from the pandemic, participating settings successfully completed projects. The **50 things to do before you're five** campaign has attracted 7,500 users, with half of settings using it to support families while the **Library 0-4** project recruited 600 new families, with a sustained rising trend. Feedback from participants and case studies suggest the **Five to Thrive**, **Phonics for Success** and **Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL)** projects were positively received and led to improvements in practitioners' and parents' self-assessed confidence to support children's literacy development, while the **Steps** project, supporting the inclusion of children with challenging behaviours, led to increases in practitioner knowledge of

supportive practices. While the evaluation did not identify evidence generation about outcomes on children, it further highlights the significant increase in rich and focused case studies produced by EY settings in response to the Targeted offer. These demonstrate success in designing and implementing ambitious projects in settings and illustrate a focus on children's learning and practitioner motivation to engage in improvement work.

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)

A wide range of programmes were delivered under this theme, covering a range of issues around inclusion, the provision of education for children with special educational needs and the training of professionals (including teachers) to support this provision, and including a range of projects. While the pandemic significantly disrupted aspects of this theme's work, particularly as it pertained to health services provision, the programme participants capitalised on innovation opportunities enabled by the pandemic, leading to the introduction of new more effective practices now being sustained. The theme saw increases in the number of staff trained in SEND and SEMH and schools with a named Mental Health Lead and policy. Attendance data demonstrated a 15% increase in families participating in **SENDIASS**. **Pinpoint** introduced online provision for parent meetings, also increasing participation and engagement. In education settings, 90% of participants of **YMCA** training to support CYP's well-being reported increased knowledge while completion of **Steps** training increased to 97% of target schools, with evidence of sustained impact: over 90% of schools have maintained their accredited status suggesting the programme is becoming well embedded in the area. The case studies supported these observations. The **SEND Review** showed a 2-fold increase in the number of settings who perceived their SEND provision as positive and effective.

Twinning Activity

A specific feature of Year 5 for FECOA (and for all other Opportunity Areas), focusing on sharing practice with other, relatively similar, local areas to apply learning from earlier phases of the programme, saw FECOA 'twinned' with Peterborough. Substantial **SEMH training** was offered to Peterborough schools by YMCA. Impacts from the training has not yet been fully derived but participant feedback suggested high satisfaction and increased confidence. Second key feature, a **phonics improvement project (Little Wandle)** was implemented in six Peterborough schools. The twinning case studies demonstrated a high level of consistency, all but one using the template developed specifically for Year 5 of FECOA. They were also systematic in the use of data in relation to evidencing the impact of the project on phonics outcomes. Five of the six schools produced comprehensive case study reports (8 in total), drawing on data from phonics skills checks, showing, in most participating schools, improvements in the proportion of pupils achieving expected levels in the phonics check. Given the national decreases in phonics preparedness due to the pandemic, this suggests an important and reasonably well-evidenced positive impact. It also illustrates a good evidence-generating approach to implementation and evaluation. The evaluation of the **Steps tutor training** in Peterborough showed self-reported changes in participant approaches and a decrease in exclusions which cannot be causally attributed to the project but suggest a change in a positive direction.

Impacts, overall

The evidence review suggests that a meaningful, yet minority, proportion of institutions were able to engage in school-led evidence generation and independent (self-)evaluation activity as part of improving their practice, despite the challenging public health circumstances. Such activities were well supported by the FECOA team. This systematic review of locally produced evidence suggests that while the majority of evidence generated by settings was self-reported, with some good examples of more systematic evidence-generation, the overall evaluation suggests some overall patterns that point to programme-level impacts of FECOA, particularly in Year 5. Moreover, positive evidence of the effective high-fidelity implementation of FECOA projects in the 'Twinning' area and positive feedback and, at times, evidence of impact of those projects, points to significant learning and improvement in the region as a result of FECOA.

The review suggests that across the themes, there is evidence of increased participation from settings, practitioners and families despite significant challenges, with evidence of a sustained and at times increasing trend. It also shows consistent increases in practitioners' and parents' self-reported knowledge and confidence and high participant satisfaction, corroborated to some extent by case studies and other evidence, although with little evidence generation related to outcomes. Particularly positive is the evidence of sustained new practices in settings and structures introduce to support sustainability, while may help settings address the continued challenges from staff turnover and impact of the pandemic. These findings are to some extent support by the staff survey, with the caveat of a low response rate. The Year 5 pre-post survey suggests an increase from start to end of Year 5 in the number of practitioners across the FECOA who felt that FECOA projects had offered them the opportunity to engage with activity that otherwise would not have been possible. It further suggests an increase in practitioners/settings' sense of belonging to a community of practice and sense of impact of the programme on own practice and their level of self-perceived experimentation with new ideas and use of evidence in their practice also increased from start to end of Year 5 as did self-reported collaboration with and help-seeking from colleagues. Some results are mixed, however, illustrating the challenges of effecting change and those from the pandemic in this region.

This evaluation suggests the FECOA programme has provided a significant foundation to help settings build expertise and implementation capacity to identify challenges they face and interventions to address those. The successful implementation, and evidence of impact, of several FECOA projects in the Twinning area further offers evidence of clarity of effective approaches and factors facilitating implementation. This forms a solid basis from which to move towards systematically evaluating outcomes that matter in a way that can feed directly into improving education, equity, and social mobility.

Conclusions: Legacy

This evaluation has produced evidence of the potential legacy of the FECOA programming. Despite significant challenges with staffing and children and young people's learning and well-being, exacerbated by the pandemic, there is evidence of sustained capacity building in many settings, visible, for example, in the development of new policies and trained named staff to address challenges to pupils' learning and well-being needs. There is also evidence of improved capacity to design and document projects, with some movement towards understanding evidence-generating approach to

trace impact on pupil outcomes. The Twinning project shows that it should be possible for the region to continue to draw on these beyond the programme.

The evaluation identified several key mechanisms supporting the scale up and sustainability of these developments which the region can continue to draw on. Firstly, a place-based approach in achieving these impacts is central: linking interventions with local settings and practitioners' perceived priorities and needs is key, involving both clear communication and, where needed, tailoring, as well as systematically drawing on local knowledge to inform implementation. Secondly, evidence-based interventions often more effective, and perceived as such, further supporting implementation, coupled with strategies and tools for locally evaluating impact which can act as a scaffold for settings and practitioners to monitor and evidence impact. Thirdly, educative planning and evaluation templates can easily and cost-effectively facilitate settings' in designing and documenting focused projects. Finally, developing critical mass to allow for the creation of communities of practice and networks of settings with similar needs which can support each other in implementation, professional development and evidence generation, and that are likely to persist beyond programme end are key to sustainability. These mechanisms should support the region in sustaining the impacts of the FECOA, and scale them up to new settings in the region and beyond, to enable a continued to support the learning and social mobility of children and young people in the region as it recovers from the impact of the pandemic.